DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 028 EC 300 005

AUTHOR Murphy, Linda; Della Corte, Suzanne
TITLE Back to School--Getting Off to a Good Start.
PUB DATE Oct 90
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM Lindell Press, Inc., P.O. Box 462, South Salem, NY 10590 ($20.00 per year, $3.75 per issue).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT Special Parent/Special Child; v6 n5 Sep-Oct 1990

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent School Relationship; Parent Student Relationship; Parent Teacher Conferences; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Special Needs Students; *Student Adjustment

ABSTRACT

This newsletter offers practical guidelines to parents of children with special needs of ways to get the school year off to a good start. Such children's school-related worries as fears of getting lost or of not making friends are noted. Specific suggestions are offered to help in the areas of school separation, making friends, and school achievement. Parents are encouraged to become informed about the child's school and special education laws, and to attend school meetings. Typical wishes of parents of special children (such as knowing what is going on at school) and of teachers (such as knowing what is going on at home) are identified. In addition, do's and don'ts are listed for teachers (e.g., do set up a reliable method of communication between home and school and don't dismiss parent comments) and for parents (e.g., do encourage good work habits). Also included is a sample letter from a teacher to parents of teenagers concerning the development of self help skills and suggestions from a psychologist on helping your child adjust to school after vacation. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED329028

Special Parent ★Special Child★

VOL. 6, NO. 5 SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1990

BACK TO SCHOOL—GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

Each September begins a new school year, continuing the cycle of children leaving the security of home to venture out into the world of school with all its uncertainties and challenges.

To special parents, school means more than a fresh start, since special children more than others require the specific intervention of dedicated teachers in order to learn and grow. Because of their learning difficulties, special children are more likely to develop school-related worries and fears.

Thus, both teachers and parents must be sensitive to each child's unique qualities, strengths as well as weaknesses, and all concerned must work as a team so that the special child can reach his or her full potential.

In this issue we will focus on how to help the special child get off to a good start, and continue throughout the year to make this the best school year ever!

School-related worries

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda Murphy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The school year not only brings shiny new books and sharpened pencils; to some special children it unfortunately brings worries and fears.

Separating from parents often generates anxiety and to the special child who is perhaps more dependent than other children this anxiety is often severe in nature or prolonged in intensity.

Many special children, especially those with learning disabilities, are frequently disoriented by new places, thus finding themselves lost or confused in unfamiliar school buildings or hallways, unable to move around with ease or confidence.

Some special children are apt to be socially immature, and lack the confidence or skills necessary to make new friends or function in new surroundings.

In addition, many special children because of circumstances do not attend neighborhood schools and this hinders after school play experiences and camaraderie. Special children are likely to be shifted from program to program or school to school, are often bused long distances and this

EC 300005

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

interferes with their ability to meet neighborhood playmates. Moreover, having to adjust to new physical surroundings, new bus schedules, different teachers and routines, year in and year out creates more turmoil.

Often, special children faced with difficulty in acquiring academic skills, are convinced that they are "dumb," or incapable of learning. This lowered self-esteem frequently manifests itself in physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches.

Children who encounter difficulties at school can become demoralized and often lack the desire to attempt any new task.

Indeed, the lot of the special child can be grim, unless parents and teachers are sensitive to the factors that can compromise the special child's ability to achieve success at school.

Ways to help

Begin by discussing school a week before opening day. Encourage positive thoughts about school by being positive yourself. Get in the mood by allowing your child to choose items in her new school wardrobe, or pick out a new lunch box, for example. This generates excitement and interest.

School separation. The special child who experiences problems separating from the security of home can be reassured when parents appear calm themselves, especially at leave-taking.

If your child protests when she leaves for school, remind her that you will be seeing her later in the day. Specify the exact time and place, such as "I will be waiting for you at the bus stop at 3 PM." Be sure to be there promptly. A message from home, tucked in her lunchbox often is reassuring; this can be something as simple as a card with a happy-face sticker on it.

To ease fears and insecurities do not send your child into the unknown. Find out the location of your child's school or program ahead of time and get permission to visit. If at all possible arrange to meet the teacher and visit the classroom. Tour the building so that your child becomes familiar with the location of bathroom, cafeteria, hallways and show her how to get from the bus to the classroom. If your child travels to school by bus, make several dry runs by car so that she becomes familiar with the route. Point out landmarks such as bridges, or traffic intersections, or sights she will encounter. In this way she will become comfortable with the school routine.

Making friends. Many special children are self-conscious, lacking the social skills to initiate or sustain friendships. You can help your child develop the necessary social skills by making sure she is familiar with accepted social protocols. This entails knowing how to greet others, and how to

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Linda Murphy, M.S., is the founder and for the past 15 years has been the director of a widely known, approved school for mentally handicapped children serving children ages 5-21 in Westchester County, NY, and surrounding areas. A lecturer, teacher and administrator, she is a foster parent and the parent of a handicapped child, too.

Suzanne Della Corte, M.S., for 15 years co-director of the school, is responsible for curricula, staff development and supervision. She is author of numerous research projects in the field and has edited psychology textbooks for a leading New York publisher.

ABOUT SPECIAL PARENT/SPECIAL CHILD:

Special Parent/Special Child is a bi-monthly newsletter published by Lindell Press, Inc., P.O. Box 462, South Salem, New York 10590. Special Parent/Special Child is designed to promote effective family functioning between parent and special child. Bylined articles do not necessarily reflect the publisher's viewpoint. Annual subscription rate is $20.00 per year. Send check to Special Parent/Special Child at above address. Foreign subscriptions: postal money order in US dollars. Reprints are available at $3.75 per issue. Copyright © 1985. All rights reserved.

ask others to play. You can help develop your child's play skills by playing board games at home, making sure she knows how to take turns, and share possessions and toys. The more hobbies and skills your child has mastered, the more interesting she will appear to others. This means helping her to participate in recreational programs, arts and crafts programs, or engage in activities such as swimming, horseback riding, scouting.

If your child is isolated by the nature of her handicapping condition, it is important to make sure opportunities are available for peer play. This means inviting classmates over as often as possible. If your child attends out-of-district schools, you should encourage afternoon visits or weekend sleepovers. This is often complicated and time-consuming but is well worth the effort. The child who has friends at school perceives school in a much happier frame of mind.

Encourage good grooming skills in your child. Clean, shining hair, a bright smile, and up-to-date fashionable clothes give your child a lift. Making sure your special child looks like everyone else her age assures acceptability.

School achievement. Provide a good background for learning by stimulating your child with experiences and activities that reinforce school subjects. Trips to libraries, reading aloud to your child, visiting museums, encouraging a hobby, increase your child's fund of general information. Art activities such as cutting, pasting, painting reinforce the hand-eye and finger coordination necessary for handwriting. Physical activities such as skating, swimming, hiking, bicycling are all important aspects of learning.

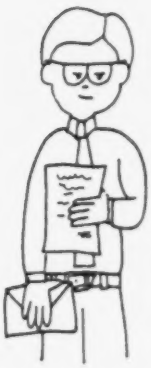
Don't let your child's main recreational pursuit consist of watching TV; this will reduce her ability to achieve school success.

Developing confidence. Having a good sense of self-worth and self-esteem is the foundation for school achievement. However, many special children are frustrated by their difficulty in acquiring school-related or paper and pencil skills. Often, special children do not retain previously mastered skills and this impairs their motivation. Children who must struggle to achieve academic success need to be shored up by experiencing success outside the academic realm. Encourage your child to develop a specific skill or master a sport. Give more attention to those achievements than to academic failures.

It's best to be as open and honest as possible with your special child, explaining matter of factly the nature and extent of her disability. Discuss how this can sometimes impede school progress. Let her know that this does not mean she is a failure in her teacher's eyes or yours. Sometimes, if the child has a fuller understanding of her problems she is better equipped to surmount the difficulty.

Assure your child that you and her teachers are working as a team to help her make progress—and that she is a vital part of that team.

Ways for home and school to work together



Remember that the special child is one person but that her life is divided into two parts, home and school. If parents and teachers work together, the special child's life is made whole. Unfortunately this is often not the case; when parents and teachers don't support each other they inadvertently sabotage each other's best efforts, jeopardizing the special child's chances for school success. The tendency to blame each other—especially when the child encounters difficulty—leads to suspicion and mistrust between parent and teacher. The lack of trust, in turn creates an unhappy environment that can sap the child's energy and compromise her motivation to achieve at school.

Children often copy the examples set by their elders and if parents blame teachers for their child's failures, or speak disparagingly about school, they run the risk of rearing children who share their negative views.

In the long run, a feeling of mutual commitment between child and teacher, and teacher and parent is the child's best resource.

Developing cooperation. One of the best ways to develop trust in your child's school is to become as informed as possible. Find out all you can about PL 94-142, the federal law that insures your child's rights to a free and appropriate education. Most state education department and local school districts have pamphlets that explain the law, what it can do for your child, and what the parent's role is in the process.

Attend meetings. By taking advantage of open-school nights, parent conferences, parent-teacher organizations you are letting the school know you care about your child and her education. Pay careful attention to what goes on at school. Read and respond to any written messages or inquiries from the school. Your knowledge of school events and routines will extend and enrich your child's school experience.

Often parents and teachers are unaware that they are operating at cross purposes. Here are some of the most frequently expressed wishes and concerns of parents and teachers, which highlights the importance of working together in the best interests of the child.

The parent's wish list

"I wish I knew what was going on at school, especially if something has happened out of the ordinary. My child comes home from school upset and it's only later that I find out that the teacher was out sick, or that there is a new child in the class upsetting the apple cart or that there was a change in the routine. If someone would only let me know I could smooth things out. I know teachers are busy but a brief note would help.

I wish I knew the best way to reach the teacher. I don't want to interrupt her when she is with the class or bother her during lunch but there are times when I really need to contact her. It's not important enough for a formal conference, just a few minutes is all I need.

I wish I knew what to do about homework. Should I help my child or should she do it on her own and let the teacher correct it? Sometimes homework seems too hard. Sometimes it seems like

work she did last month. How can I help if no one tells me?

I wish someone had told me way before the report card came home that there were problems. It's a shock to find out she's done so poorly, but what am I supposed to do when I find out at the end of the year?

I wish I knew how to tell the teacher what our expectations are for our child without her getting so defensive.

I wish I knew if I'm bothering the teacher when things are happening at home. I don't know if it's important for us to tell her or not.

I wish the teacher or the school had a better system for getting messages from school to home. Sometimes messages or letters are left at school, or lost on the bus, or I find it buried somewhere weeks later. We need a fail-safe communication method!

I wish the school would let me know when something good has happened at school or if they see any improvements. It seems that the only time I hear from school is when there are problems.

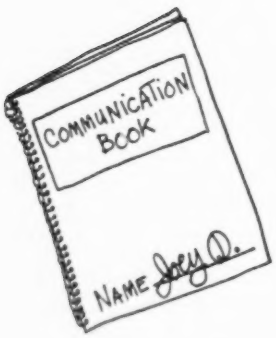
I wish the teacher would explain my child's program to me and why she seems to be doing the same thing over and over. It seems to me that things could go a lot faster.

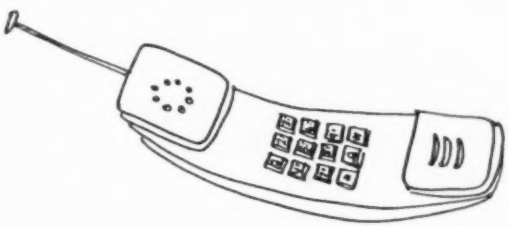
Please remember my child is in special education for a reason. She needs all the help she can get from all of us."

The teacher's wish list

"I wish I knew what was going on at home, especially if something has happened. If I had known that there was an illness, death, new baby, visit from grandparents, or a babysitter because the parents were away, I could smooth things out. I know parents are busy; just a brief note or phone call would clarify things so that I could help.

I wish I knew how to contact the mother or guardian. I realize it's hard to be a working mother—I'm one too—but please, please let us know where you can be reached during the day. When your child is sick, or I want to ask you a question, or let you know if something has happened and the school office can't find you because your emergency or daytime telephone numbers have changed it makes it very difficult.





I wish the parents would find out about the homework policy. We don't expect parents to do the child's homework for her, but we do have definite expectations that the parent see that the homework or report is turned in on time. Sometimes homework is a review of things the child already knows, sometimes it's a report on something different.

I wish parents would keep on top of how their child is doing at school. If they touched based more often, their child's report card wouldn't be such a surprise.

I wish the parents weren't so defensive or evasive when I mention problems. Nobody is attaching blame—if we are honest with each other, then we can get together and help the child.

HELPFUL COMPANION ISSUES

Vol. 1, No. 5
Getting Ready for School

Vol. 4, No. 1
Parent and Teacher Relationships

Vol. 4, No. 5
Helping Your Child Achieve at School

Vol. 6, No. 1
School-Related Stress

$3.75 per issue or—special bargain rate—$10 for all four issues!

Send check or money order to:
Lindell Press
Box 462
South Salem, NY 10590

I wish the parents would tell me when they are having problems at home. I'm sure that my suggestions would be helpful. Sometimes when the child realizes her teacher knows what's going on at home she feels better.

I wish parents would sign and return permission slips promptly. Having to track a parent down by phone, or worse yet have the child miss a trip because there isn't a signed permission slip is unnecessary.

I wish the parents would let us know when they are pleased. It's nice to hear that we are doing a good job. Sometimes it seems the only messages we get from parents are complaints.

I wish the parents would try to understand why their child isn't learning at a faster rate, or achieving at grade level. I know that you say "but she did this last year," but for the most part your child learns slowly and needs repetition. I vary her work as much as possible, presenting the material in many different ways.

Please remember your child is in special education for a reason. She needs all the help she can get from all of us."

Do's and don'ts for teachers

Do set up a reliable method of communication between home and school. Finding a note at the end of the school day about some important incident in the child's life can affect school performance. Contact the parents of the children in your class and discuss the best method of contacting each other. This might include a notebook that goes back and forth daily or a special pocket in the school bag where parents and teachers look for notes each day.

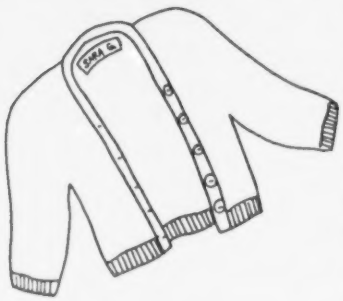
Do write a friendly "first day note." Get off to a good start by introducing yourself by name. List all the names of the children in the class, provide a brief description of the daily schedule, the names of other teachers or clinicians working with each child.

Do let the parents know how, when and where you can be contacted. Some teachers prefer telephone contacts early in the day, others prefer written messages. Laying ground rules for communication avoids misunderstandings and hard feelings.

Do let parents know what kind of personal items such as cassettes, tapes, toys are permissible in the classroom and what things are prohibited.

Don't dismiss parent comments or information as irrelevant or unfounded. Parents knows their child better than anyone else and their information can be invaluable in developing a meaningful educational program.

Do's and don'ts for parents



Do have reasonable expectations for your child. Making demands for grade level achievement or to perform beyond her abilities creates needless frustration and thwarts her sense of self-esteem.

Do encourage good work habits. Help your child help herself by assigning a specific time and place for homework. Make sure she is well rested and has a nutritious diet, and is ready for school on time.

Do let the school know of any changes in your child's life that could affect school performance. This includes new siblings, illnesses, etc. Notify the school of any changes in your child's medical care such as changes of primary medical doctor, or medication dosages. Never send medicines in unmarked bottles or envelopes. Schools are not permitted to dispense medicine unless there is a written medical order.

Do have a foolproof system, with back-up, of where you can be reached during the day. Make sure you have an updated number of a reliable friend or neighbor who is responsible for your child's care in the event you cannot be contacted. These numbers are vital in the case of emergencies, snow closings, etc.

Teacher to parent

Here's a helpful note from veteran teacher Marilyn Amdur of New York who teaches teenagers.

Dear Parents and Grandparents,

Once again I need to enlist your kind cooperation to help make my new grooming program a success! I see so many nice changes in my class; my "guys" are really starting to take pride in their appearance! Our slogan is CLEAN IS IN! During "NEWS" I select children to show off new hairdos, clean teeth, hair, nails, etc. I thoroughly compliment the soaped, deodorized, powdered, well-groomed look. All the "ahs" and "ohs" over clean and properly fitting stylish clothes go a long way!

A cohesive grooming program can eliminate so many problems and help foster independent self-help skills. Although a few of my children have some independent grooming skills at home, they need reminders that when they shower, they need to do more than stand there and drink the water!

Our self-help program will not interfere with your child's academics or other activities. Please send in the following:

- washcloth and towel
- shampoo (we have a blowdryer)
- brush or comb
- powder
- toothbrush, toothpaste
- mouthwash and/or breath spray
- nail brush, manicure items
- shaving supplies (if you want us to work on this area).

Please do not hesitate to let me know if there is something that you would like me to focus on with your child, or if I can help in any way—that's what I'm here for.

Many thanks. Have a nice day.

Marilyn Amdur

PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER

Helping your child adjust to school after vacation

by George Popper, Ph. D.

Summer vacation is over and it's time for children to return to school and get back into the swing of things—a difficult task for special children. A characteristic of mentally handicapped or mentally retarded children is a kind of rigidity about adapting to changes in their routine.

Most parents are well aware of their special child's need for a predictable, secure environment and they will do everything they can to avoid problems. In fact, many parents program their lives around their child's habits, i.e, their need for eating certain foods on certain days of the week, religiously watching particular television programs, wearing special clothing or any of the other quirks to which the child has become accustomed. Understandably, parents react with alarm when a suggestion is made to alter their child's routine—why upset the apple cart and create a problem for us and our child? Sometimes change is unavoidable: vacation ends, school begins, the TV breaks, any of a hundred other things occur.

As a special parent there are many things you can do to help your child adapt to change. Recognize, however, that a child with limited resources likely will always have difficulty adjusting to unforeseen circumstances and it is important not to demand more of your child than he or she is capable. Here are some suggestions to consider.

1. Prepare your child for predictable changes before they occur. For example, as summer vacation draws to a close, start talking with your child about the beginning of school a week or so ahead of time. Purchase clothing and school supplies with your child. A few days before the start of school, help your child wind down from the relative freedom enjoyed during vacation. Getting to bed earlier and getting up around the time normally required for school reduces the stress your child would face if the change were sudden.

2. Don't overstimulate; allow your child quiet time to relax. Table games, listening to music or even watching some television help to bring a child down from the activities of the day.

3. As with all things, practice moderation. Late night television watching during vacation may have been acceptable but can wreak havoc during the school year. Most children require eight hours of sleep and plenty of time in the morning to prepare for school. Treat Sunday night as a school night, making sure that bedtime is early enough to insure proper rest.

4. Don't allow schedules and routines to become a problem by creating inflexibility and rigid adherence. If you begin to sense that this is occurring (for instance, when your child becomes excessively unhappy with any change in her routine), it's time to do something about it. Although painful at first, it is sometimes necessary to introduce changes (such as not having eggs every Wednesday) to encourage a greater amount of tolerance in your child. It's easy to avoid a problem, but better to face it and deal with it.

5. Introduce change slowly and over a period of time. If you know that a change is about to occur, prepare your child for that eventuality. Letting her know too far in advance creates too much anxiety while not letting her know soon enough may be too drastic. Give her the time she needs to adjust.

Illustrations by Leah Spring